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Students can learn to write verse by (1) perceiving that poetic materials are inside and all around them and making lists of items that appeal to their senses, (2) organizing their material through the use of imagery, (3) experimenting with various meters, particularly the ballad stanza, until they can arrange words in rhythmic patterns (4) relating rhythms, words, and sounds to the spirit and meaning of their poems, (5) compressing an image into haiku, and (6) developing a class poem and comparing the finished product with a well-known poet's handling of the same theme. In completing these exercises, students develop an awareness of the material and nature of poetry. (JB)

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Verse Writing in the English Class

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THE PRACTICE of composition, English teachers will generally agree, should be linked to the study of literature. After all, what is more natural than to follow the discussion of an essay with an assignment to write an essay? In line with this argument, some teachers, usually inexperienced ones, blithely ask their students to write a poem after they have read a poem in class.

Unfortunately, the concept and the technique of a poem are so difficult that students rarely produce anything that bears any resemblance to poetry. Experienced English teachers, therefore, judiciously avoid the assignment of writing verse and are satisfied with prose compositions.

There can be no quarrel with this attitude, for it is far more realistic and sensible than the demand for original poetry from students who have no talent and little knowledge of what a poem is. The attempt to write poetry, nevertheless, if properly directed, can be a rewarding experience, for through the writing of a poetic composition students become aware of the material and the nature of verse and thus gain an appreciation of poetry that is often missing in the high school class. This does not mean that all a teacher has to do is merely assign the writing of a poem. An assignment like that becomes a cruel and pointless exercise.

But a teacher can lead a class into the writing of verse. First, the students must be made to see that the material of poetry is inside and all around them. To do that the class must read poems that illuminate what seems to be the commonplace. In "Lamp Posts," for example, Helen Hoyt finds beauty in the lamp posts in the park; in "The Red Wheelbarrow," William Carlos Williams is captivated by the sight of a red wheelbarrow glistening with rain. E. E. Cummings enjoys the children's spring ecstasy in "chanson innocente." Walt Whitman finds a miracle in looking "at strangers opposite me riding in the car." An effective poem to awaken the students to the exciting fact that they have the material for poetry within themselves is Rupert Brooke's "The Great Lover," particularly the section of the poem that lists some of the "little" things in life that the poet loves:

These I have loved:
White plates and cups, clean-gleaming,
Ringed with blue lines; and feathery, faery dust;
Wet roofs beneath the lamp-light; the strong crust
Of friendly bread; and many-tasting food;
Rainbows; and the blue bitter smoke of wood;

And Brooke goes on for many lines to catalogue those things he has loved.

Reading these lines, the students begin to realize that Rupert Brooke is a "great lover," because he loves life with all of his five senses. Once they understand that the poet can respond to such seemingly trivial items as blankets, sheets, plates, cups, and old clothes, the everyday things that are really significant, then the students can become "great lovers" themselves. The next step, then, is to ask the students to draw up a personal list of items that appeal to their senses in a particular kind of way. They can head their list, as Brooke does, "These I have loved." There is no need to use rhyme or even to arrange the items in rhythmic form. Since they are different from Rupert Brooke, the things they love will be different, too. The boy may love the swish of the basketball as it slips through the net, the crack of the bat as it meets the ball, the smoky tang of a steak broiled on charcoal, the tug of the rope as he steers his sailboat. Girls may write about the silken feel of a party gown, the throb of the latest musical hit, the velvety taste of chocolate on an ice cream sundae. What should be emphasized is that each person's list must be honest. The list then becomes, in a sense, a portrait of the student. Even when these items are listed without any attempt to fashion them into a poem, they achieve a kind of poetry of their own. The students are discovering the material of poetry.

SOME students, however, like to work on their list, searching for the right adjective and the right verb to express exactly how they feel. The results sometimes approach a simple eloquence that is truly creative, as in these examples taken from student writing:

Hilltops with their glossy-green grass, butterflies flying in uncharted course . . .

To lie and listen to the slow swishing of extended leaves like outstretched hands . . .

The subway with the lights piercing through the darkened tunnel.
The streak of lightning on a dark summer sky,
The peace of lying in the still darkness . . .

The yellow green of new spring leaves
The shadowy patterns that they make,
The sky when it is deep pure blue
Sunshine through the green foliage,
The golden sparks from a campfire bright
That rise into the black night air . . .

Undoubtedly, teachers can find other poems that will lead students into a discovery of the well of poetry they have in themselves. And undoubtedly again, teachers will use other methods, too, for that purpose. Good results can be obtained sometimes simply by having a class listen to good music. Adolescents being what they are, sad music, especially Tchaikowsky, seems to get the best results. Another device is to have the students jot down anything that comes into their mind, a kind of stream-of-consciousness technique which, if successful, reveals the student to himself.

Now that the class has an idea of what the material of poetry is—and it can be anything—then the next step is to help the boys and girls organize their material. Perhaps the best way is to show the students through the reading of poetry that much of the tension of verse de-

pends on imagery, especially the comparison, for through the use of the simile and metaphor the poet erects a bridge between his perception and that of the reader. The students can be taught to translate a random object or scene into poetic significance by using an effective comparison. In Carl Sandburg's famous poem, for example, the fog is compared to a cat, and it is this comparison that is the basis for the structure of the entire poem. It is also the basis for the diction and the other elements of the technique, for the poet has to create the mood of the poem by means of sibilant words and short lines that typify both the cat and the fog. In this exercise, fire hydrants develop nostrils, the sun melts into a sunset, boys leaping on their sleds become birds breasting the snow, windows are transformed into eyes—the possibilities are infinite, but the teacher must be careful to discard the obvious and the far-fetched. The figures must be apt, and when they are, they form the basis for a poetry the students can write. To cite one example, if the seasons of the year can be applied to the school day, and if the students can work that out so that the comparison holds, the result can have a poetic effect. Thus, in the morning we have the spring of the year when the sap is just beginning to rise and the students begin to stir, moving somewhat slowly, just on the verge of participation. As the day progresses, we have summer, and here the students are in full bloom—active, gay, animated. Then comes the fall, and things begin to sag and wilt. The students gradually leave the school in much the same way as the leaves drop down from the trees. With winter, at the end of the day, the school is desolated, and each classroom is littered with the snow of scrap paper. Taking everyday situations or objects—the bus in the morning, a tree in winter, rain on the roof, the dismissal bell, the sound of leaves in the wind, taking an examination, ice skating, dancing, playing football—and subjecting these to metaphor give the students subject matter and techniques to fashion a "poem." A few quotations from actual student writing illustrate this point vividly:

Warm and friendly,
The blankets
Are like the grasp
Of the soft, pudgy fingers
Of a gracious fat lady.

We were friends,
The wind and I;
We danced and frolicked together
As the grasses nodded a rhythm
And the butterflies clapped their wings
In the springtime.

Night rules the street
But here and there are rebels,
Streetlamps, throwing their pale
  luminous hair about them.

Screaming, he throws the coverlet of
  sleep
Aside

Spring is a tree
Or humanity
Turning its withered arms
Toward the sun
so that its beauty
may be restored.

in reality
truth is a canary
caged
yet unaware of it,

If death should come
As he usually comes
Treading softly as our black cat

Brahms
  Highly polished mahogany furniture
    in a long, aristocratic hallway

You drip with the syrup of welcome

Gone the paper whiteness of a
Winter day.

Once the student has the comparison, he can develop his poem, a poem, it is hoped, that will use appropriate rhythm, words, and sounds that will be coordinated with both the spirit and the meaning.

At this point the students can begin to "play" with rhythm, noting that in the poems they read several dominant patterns emerge. The following lines illustrate the most popular meters in English verse:

iambic: It is an ancient Mariner
trochaic: Tell me not in mournful numbers
anapestic: With a hey and a ho and a hey nonino
dactylic: This is the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and the hemlocks

These lines can be scanned and perhaps tapped out in class.

It is not at all necessary at this time for the student to learn the technical names of these meters, although they do enjoy mouthing such expressions as "dactylic hexameter hypercatalectic." Nevertheless, they should feel, as they scan the verse they read, that rhythm has a functional use, and they can soon sense that the anapest, for example, has a lilting or dancing quality that can be used for lines that express gaiety, movement, and freedom.

For an exercise in the rigorous requirements of rhythm in verse, the teacher can develop a ballad stanza in class. Obviously this is not the way to write poetry, but it does illustrate the rhythmic demands of the stanza. The ballad form is used because it is simple and functional. First, the class is asked to decide on a subject. Let us say that the students choose to write on "Spring." They then are asked to suggest a first line that suggests the subject and at the same time contains four feet of iambic verse. As each line is offered, the class examines it to see whether it is appropriate both in content and technique.

Let us suggest a first line here to illustrate the procedure:

The grass is swaying silver-green

A second line is now called for, again in iambic rhythm, but this time with three beats or accents. It must follow the first line logically, but it should not rhyme:

The birds are crying shrill

A third line in iambic tetrameter is submitted:

The children gallop down the street

Now the fourth line must, like the second, be iambic trimeter, must rhyme with the second line, and complete the thought of the stanza:

And only I am still.

Obviously the lines will not come as easily as all this, but they do come, and then they can be revised by the class until the stanza unfolds. The result is not poetry, but in its adherence to rhyme, rhythm, and other stanzaic requirements, it illustrates how exacting are the requirements of verse. The technique can easily be imitated and used for the light verse students write for Valentine Day and birthday greetings. At the same time, the students will get a basic concept of form and rhythm.

TO CARRY the process a little further the teacher may encourage students to experiment with the different meters until they acquire more facility in arranging words in rhythmic patterns. The class may be challenged to write a line that pauses and then runs, as if describing someone who has just received very good news. The line could be:

I stopped and I ran; I jumped and I sang.

The iambic rhythm in the line creates the pauses in the first and the third foot, and the anapestic, the movement in the second and the fourth. The class can easily develop variations on the theme.

Several classroom sessions can be devoted to sharpening the impact of the verse and using poetic techniques to transform an idea into an art form. It goes without saying that the teacher cannot reach too high, and perhaps the best way to begin is once more to work with the entire class in developing a group poem. This time the teacher should be a little more demanding, for the aim is to relate the words, rhythm, and imagery to the subject. The subject, therefore, should be rooted in the students' experience.

Let us assume that the class decides to write a poem that describes a locomotive. The students discuss the kind of verbs they would use to create the sound of the locomotive. For example, they may wish to use words like "snorts," "starts," "clicks," because the hiss at the end of these words suggests the sound of escaping steam. In determining the verse pattern, the students agree that since the train starts slowly, the lines should be short and the rhythm somewhat jerky. Then when the locomotive gets going smoothly and swiftly, the lines should become longer and the rhythm more regular and fast-paced. One class suggested that the poem start:

It snorts
And starts,
Straining to be free . . .

Then as the speed of the train accelerates, the lines stretch out longer and the rhythm clicks faster until the last line reads:

And it flies on the rails like a bird in the sky.

When the poem is completed, it can be compared with Stephen Spender's "The Express" to show how adroitly and artistically a poet handles the same theme.

Many teachers testify that they have had considerable success working with the Japanese *hokku* (or *haikai*). This form, consisting of only three lines, forces the students to compress their image into a very rigid pattern indeed. The first line consists of five syllables, the second of seven, and the third line of five again, so that the entire poem consists of only 17 syllables. This example illustrates how the *hokku* suggests rather than develops mood:

Winter
Although the wind that
Whips the bare branches is cold,
My heart is colder.

There is, as can be seen, no need for rhyme or the conventional meters of English verse.

Although this form seems easy, largely because of its brevity, the compression that this very brevity demands makes the *hokku* by no means simple to write. In three short lines, the students must learn to arrange 17 syllables into the tension of poetry. With practice, however, some of them do acquire the rather oblique look at the world around them that the *hokku* manages to catch. These examples of *hokkus* written by James E. McEuen, a student at Montgomery Blair Senior High School in Silver Springs, Maryland, indicate the possibilities of that medium for the verse-writing activities in the classroom:

The soaring redwood . . .
beauty of its timelessness
now a backyard fence.

The surly cactus,
armed with thorns to hurt the touch,
hoards water within.[1]

At this time students may begin to hand in poems of their own. Some of

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Verse Writing in the English Classroom

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the best ones could be put on the bulletin board or written on the blackboard, and all of them should be subjected to the gentle but nevertheless exacting criticism that work in verse demands. That means that the good points are praised and the weak parts are pointed out and revision suggested. This, too, can be a class exercise, but at all times the atmosphere in the class should be one in which tact and generosity become natural parts of the criticism.

No teacher can make the claim that he can produce a genuine poet. He can only lead students into an awareness and understanding of poetry by demonstrating how a poem may be written. Even though the result is a paltry thing, the effort is still rewarding, for just as the student-violinist who scratches away on a string gains insight into the artistry of the virtuoso, so the student who labors over his "poem" learns to respect and to appreciate the skill and the genius of the true poet.